

New Radiocarbon Dates from the Lynch Farm Romano-British Cemetery, near Peterborough

by

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Introduction

Late Roman cemeteries in Britain have been and continue to be studied in considerable detail. Many thousands of burials have been excavated nationally and, with a few notable exceptions (Booth *et al* 2010; Eckardt *et al* 2015), the majority of cemeteries of the 3rd and 4th centuries AD can be characterised by rows of extended inhumation burials aligned east-west (eg Philpott 1991). In the west of Britain this form of burial rite continued well into the early middle ages and is often associated with the Christianization of the early medieval populations in these areas (Petts 2004). In the east of Britain it is usually argued that this type of burial rite was superseded in the 5th century by new forms of funerary display involving both cremations and inhumations associated with new ‘Germanic’ forms of material culture (Lucy 2000).

For some decades concerns have been expressed about this rather simplistic model (Rahtz 1977; Gerrard 2015). In particular, the exclusive dating of these cemeteries with east-west aligned burials to the Roman period has been questioned. At major ‘late Roman’ urban cemeteries at Poundbury, Dorchester, Dorset and at London, the excavators explicitly state that either burial could have continued into the 5th century or that the cessation of burial at these sites could not be determined (Farwell and Molleson 1993, 219; Barber and Bowsher 2000, 56). Could burials at these and other sites have continued into the 5th century (Gerrard 2015)?

Recent work has provided equivocal answers to this question. The late Roman cemetery at Queenford Farm, Dorchester-upon-Thames, Oxfordshire, was thought by its excavators to have continued in use into the 5th century. A radiocarbon date even suggested that it might have been in use contemporaneously with a nearby Anglo-Saxon cemetery at Berinsfield (Oxfordshire) (Chambers 1987). Work by Hills and O’Connell (2009), which included a new and extensive programme of radiocarbon dating, has disproved this hypothesis. Yet my own research in Somerset has used radiocarbon to demonstrate that the supposedly ‘late Roman’ rural cemetery at Bradley Hill was in use in the 5th and 6th centuries (Gerrard 2005 and 2011).

This issue is one of significance for Northamptonshire and the Midlands more generally. If cemeteries of the 5th or 6th centuries could be identified in this region using a burial rite that reflected late Roman or late Antique practice, rather than ‘Germanic’ burial customs, it would be of considerable significance. Indeed, the *East Midlands Archaeological Research Framework* explicitly acknowl-

edges this possibility as a priority for future research for both the late Roman and early Anglo-Saxon periods (Taylor 2006, 141 and 154; Vince 2006, 166).

Lynch Farm, Peterborough

The cemetery at Lynch Farm, near Peterborough, appeared to offer an opportunity to test this possibility (Jones 1975; Gerrard 2015, 568). Excavated in the 1970s ahead of gravel extraction; this was a small rural cemetery of at least fifty inhumations. The site also produced late Roman pottery and a small hoard of coins that must have been deposited later than AD388–402, although the excavator felt that this hoard may have been deposited after the site had been abandoned (Jones 1975, 132).

More recent research would emphasise the similarities between Lynch Farm and many of the late Roman and early medieval cemeteries in the west of Britain. In particular two graves were lined with stones (Jones 1975, 99, plate 5) in a manner seen at many sites including: Bradley Hill Somerset; Caerwent (Campbell 1993) and Stoneage Barton Farm, Somerset (Webster and Brunning 2004). One grave was also associated with a bone bracelet and a double-sided composite bone comb. Current thinking would date both objects to the second half of the 4th century or the 5th century (Cool 2010, 272–273 and 300–301). Clearly Lynch Farm would appear to be a good candidate for a ‘late Roman’ cemetery that may, like Bradley Hill, have continued in use into the 5th or 6th century.

In 2015 the author approached Peterborough Museum, who gave permission for three skeletons (Numbers 24, 34 and 38) from the cemetery to be radiocarbon dated (Fig 1). Funds for this work were generously provided by the Northamptonshire Archaeological Society and the Association for Roman Archaeology, with the radiocarbon dates being carried out at Queens University Belfast by James McDonald.

Skeleton 24, an adult female aligned east-west, was the latest of a group of six adults, most of whom existed in a fragmentary state. Her stratigraphically late position and the fact that she was accompanied by the bone comb and bracelet referred to above (Jones 1975, fig 14, 36 and 38) indicated that she might be one of the latest burials at the site.

Skeleton 34, an adult male aligned east-west, overlay another east-west burial: Skeleton 30. The superimposition of this grave on an earlier burial suggested a late date for the burial.

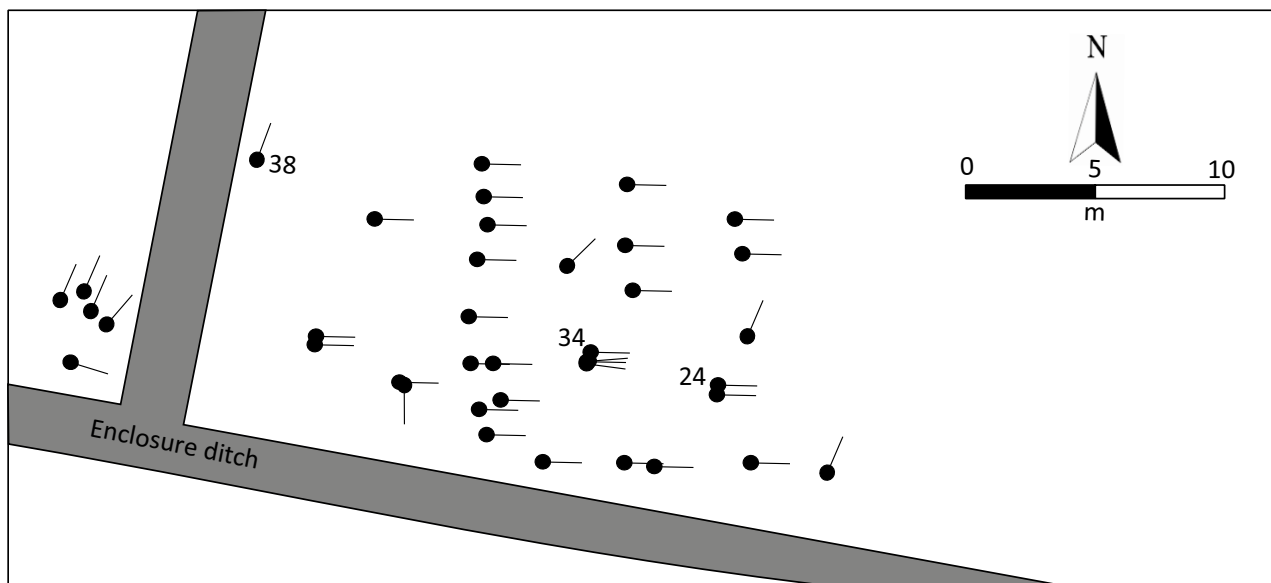


Fig 1 Schematic plan of the cemetery with dated skeletons indicated by their numbers (after Jones 1975, fig 4)

Skeleton 38, an adult male aligned south to north, was buried away from the main group of burials and parallel to the ditch that bounded the enclosure containing the cemetery.

Rib bones from each of these individuals (Hedges *et al* 2007) were radiocarbon dated and calibrated in OxCal 4.24 using the IntCal 13 atmospheric curve (Reimer *et al* 2013) (Table 1 and Fig 2).

The results of the three radiocarbon dates all fall within the historically defined confines of the Roman period when calibrated at two standard deviations (95.4% confidence). This is a disappointing result but would seem to

confirm that the cemetery at Lynch Farm should be dated exclusively to the late Roman period. Nevertheless, the failure to date this cemetery to the 5th or 6th centuries does not negate the possibility for other sites. It may also be noted that the sample size in this study is small: only three burials. There remains the possibility that a more extensive programme of radiocarbon dating of this site and others would cast new light on the transition from Roman Britain to Anglo-Saxon England.

Table 1: Radiocarbon dates for the three skeletons from Lynch Farm

Laboratory Code	Skeleton No	Conventional Radiocarbon Age BP	Calibrated date (95.4% confidence)
UBA-29600	24	1730±30	Cal AD 240–390
UBA-29601	34	1740±40	Cal AD 145–400
UBS-29602	38	1790±40	Cal AD 130–335

OxCal v4.2.4 Bronk Ramsey (2013); r:5 IntCal13 atmospheric curve (Reimer *et al* 2013)

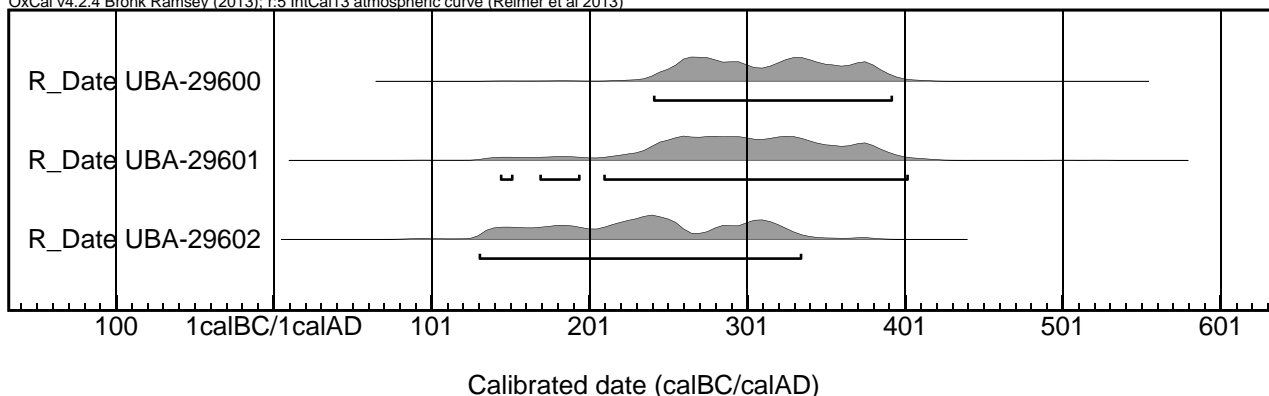


Fig 2 The calibrated radiocarbon dates

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